



The Opportunity: A New Future for I-35

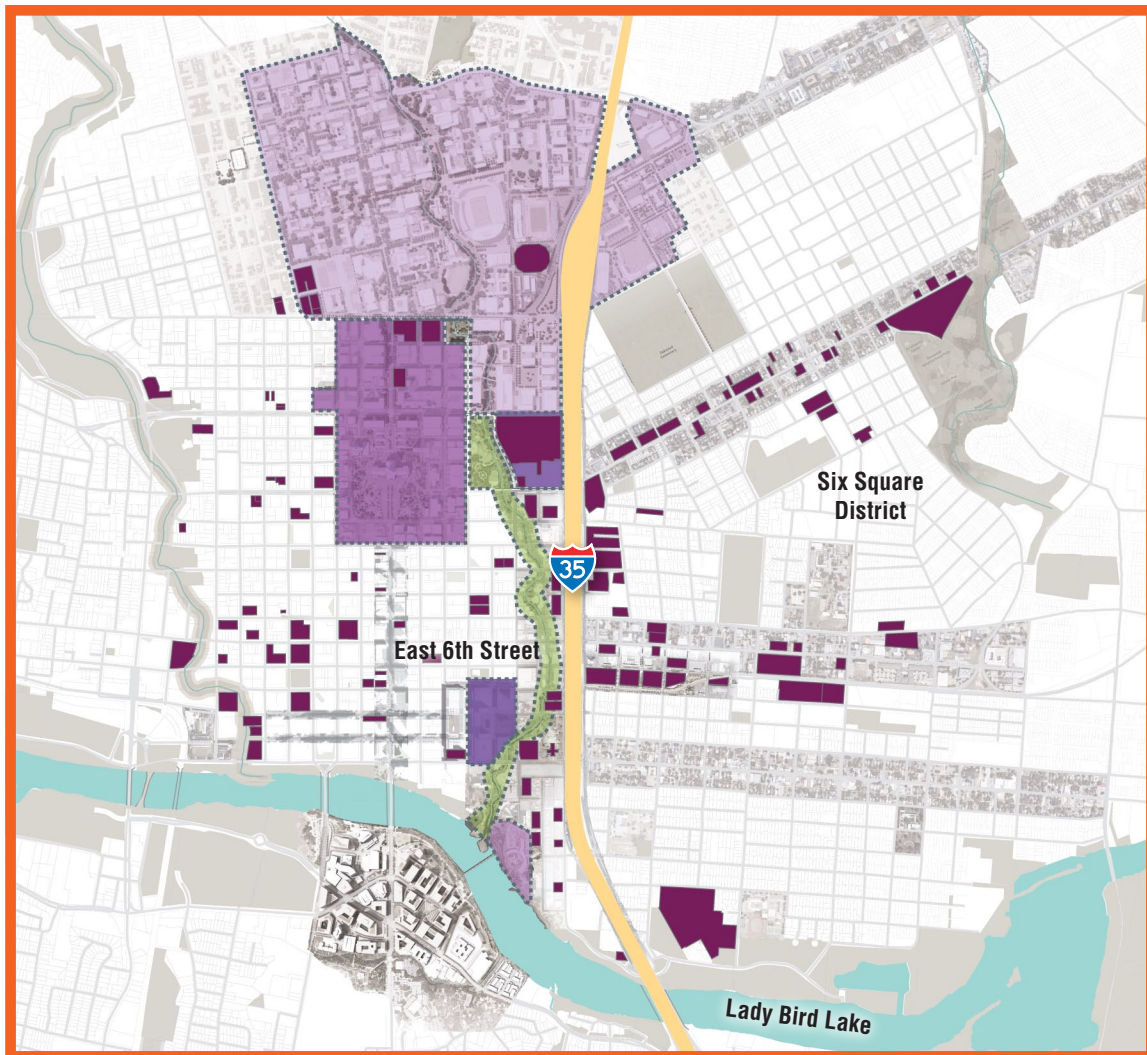
THE OPPORTUNITY REPRESENTED BY THE I-35 PROJECT must be viewed through the lens of Austin's past challenges, current opportunities, and goals for the future. The construction of I-35 in the 1950s reinforced existing patterns of racial and economic segregation in Austin, and the highway has become a physical manifestation of the divides that continue to exist today. The vision for the future of I-35 should acknowledge this community trauma and present opportunities for healing, for rebuilding trust and connections, and for capturing value for Austin community members who have historically been excluded.

Today, the reconstruction of I-35 presents an incredible opportunity to support the city's rapid growth and development. Austin has about 1 million people—making it the 11th-most-populous city in the United States—and the population is expected to grow by 45 percent by 2040. The city is one of the hottest real estate markets in the country and has a full pipeline of development projects. The city of Austin is making several key investments to support this growth.

Economic development initiatives include the planned expansion of the Convention Center, creation of a medical/innovation district at the former Brackenridge Hospital site and state-owned land near the state capitol, and Colony Park. Open-

space initiatives include Waterloo Greenway, Shoal Creek, and the Butler Trail at Lady Bird Lake. And perhaps most needed, given the city's growth trajectory, are the mobility and public transit initiatives like the multibillion-dollar Project Connect and Austin's Bicycle Master Plan.

To truly maximize the value of these other investments, the Austin community needs to play a role in shaping the redesign for I-35 so that the highway infrastructure connects with and supports these important city projects—and especially the other transportation improvements that are underway; these must be viewed as a single, interrelated system.



DOWNTOWN AUSTIN ALLIANCE; KELSEY JAMES-KAVANAUGH/ULI

Projects proposed and under development within the I-35 corridor.

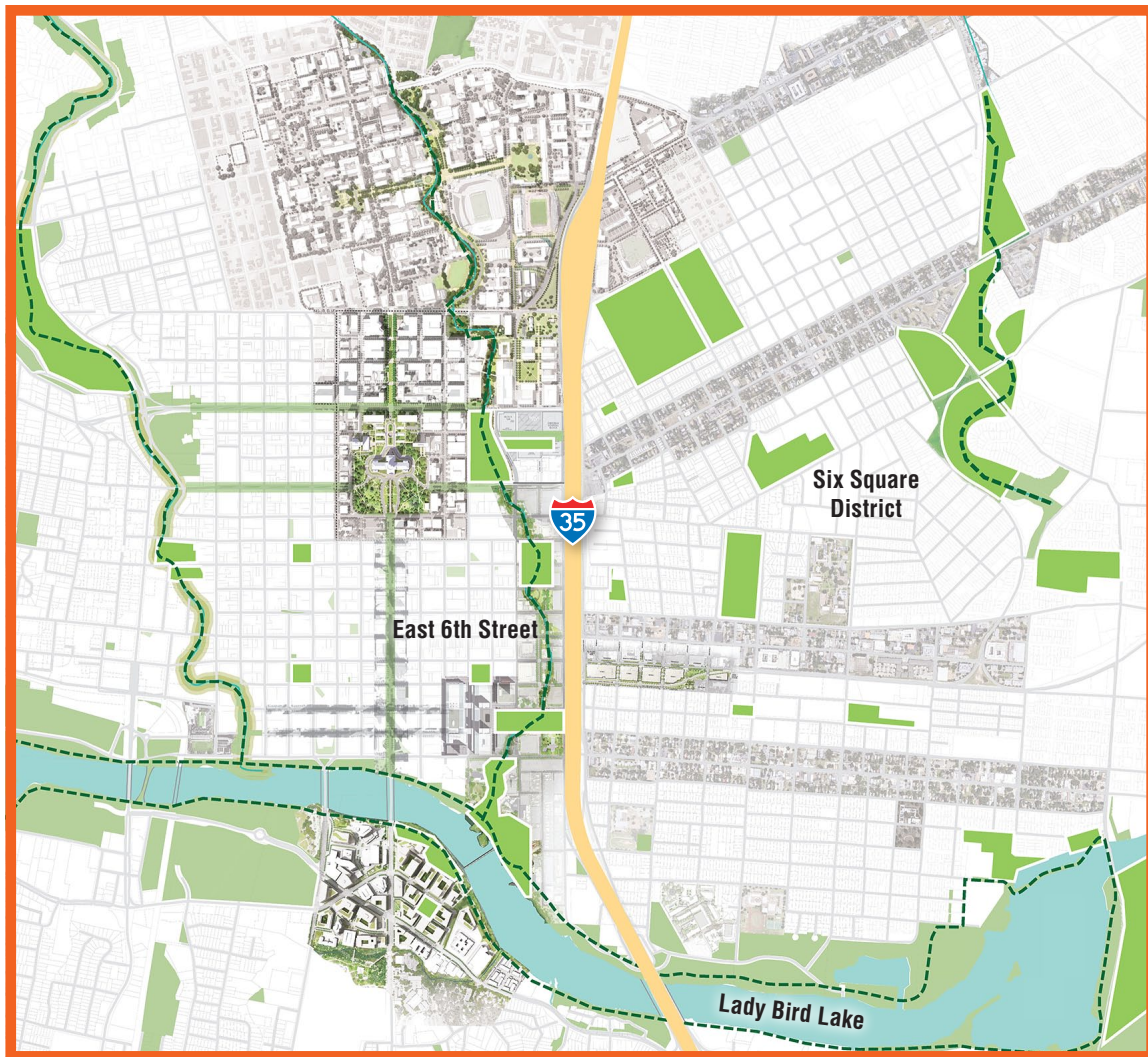
The Two Sides of Growth

Pros	Cons
11th-most-populous U.S. city and still growing	Need for 60,000 affordable housing units in next 10 years
Hottest U.S. job market (2018 and 2019)	Risk of displacement for 232,000 households
Fastest-rising apartment rents in Texas	Rapidly rising real estate taxes
Hotel room numbers that have increased 75 percent in past 10 years	Rising homelessness
Top-five growth market for global capital	Loss of child population, loss of schools

Source: ULI.

The city's rapid growth is envied by many communities around the nation that are seeing declining populations and economic activity. But with the growth come challenges. The state, city, and private sector should act more aggressively to better manage the negative sides of rapid growth. More affordable housing needs to be created and preserved, homelessness services need faster delivery, historical and cultural landmarks should be honored and acknowledged, and efforts to reduce inequality in the city along with anti-displacement policies should be more aggressively enacted or allowed by the state.

The goal of this report is to create a road map that will help Austinites take advantage of this opportunity to shape the redesign of I-35 in a way that supports the city's vision for the future. The I-35 project presents a way for the Austin community to lay the groundwork for sustained growth that reflects the city's values: growth that is inclusive and



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Austin is known for its setting in the Texas Hill Country, which shapes the regional landscape and directs the water flow to and through the city. Over the years many of these watercourses have become established routes for public rights-of-way, trails, and event spaces, frequently at the initiative of civic and community groups.

equitable and that builds on the promise of future innovation in technology and transportation.

This report organizes the panel's findings and recommendations into the following sections:

- ***Setting a Framework for Broad and Inclusive Community Engagement.*** Given the role I-35 has played in the city's history, and the imminent start of the environmental assessment for the I-35 project, the panel strongly recommends creating an inclusive community engagement process as the first priority. The Downtown Austin Alliance, the I-35 Task Force, and the East Austin Community Brain Trust have already initiated this effort. The panel outlines a
- framework and principles for engagement that support the goal of developing a co-created vision for the I-35 project.
- ***Designing for Connectivity and Mobility.*** TxDOT's proposed redesign of I-35 includes the depression of traffic lanes in certain sections of the highway, which would allow design interventions such as caps and stitches that enhance the public realm. The panel report outlines a design framework that illustrates different options as well as putting them into the context of the other modes of travel, including the Project Connect transit initiative.
- ***Project Cost and Funding Opportunities.*** Drawing on local and national precedents, the panel has analyzed the cost of potential public realm improvements and identified a range of potential financing tools.

- *Work Plan and Timeline for Engagement in TxDOT/NEPA Process.* With the TxDOT design process already underway, it will be critical for Austinites to organize quickly and prepare to participate in the upcoming scoping phase. The panel has outlined key milestones, inputs, and decision points.
- *Implementation and Governance.* This section considers key aspects of project implementation, including ownership, governance, and longer-term management/operations.



Setting a Framework for Broad and Inclusive Community Engagement

TO ENSURE THAT THE I-35 DEVELOPMENT PROCESS LIVES UP to its potential to create a catalytic and transformative project that embodies the needs and values of Austin, a comprehensive engagement plan is needed for community members and stakeholders to participate throughout the life of the project. Development professionals often recognize the need to involve citizens in decisions that affect the built environment but fail to do it effectively.

I-35 is infamous for being a marker of physical, racial, and economic divide. The legacy of racial segregation and economic inequity is still prevalent and shapes the way many Austinites view and experience the city. Using a strong engagement process can speak to the need for greater inclusion of marginalized voices in the future growth and development of the city. Community engagement can be a powerful vehicle for equity and inclusion, building opportunities for greater transparency, shared decision-making, and mutual accountability.

This is an important moment to bring stakeholders together to create a shared vision through an inclusive process that

can help shape the project. The engagement process for I-35 should leverage the democratic spirit of residents and learn from strong local examples of public participation. The city of Austin desires to be a beacon of sustainability, social equity, and economic opportunity. The I-35 project is a chance to demonstrate these values through the intentional practice of equitable development.

Key Actions and Outcomes

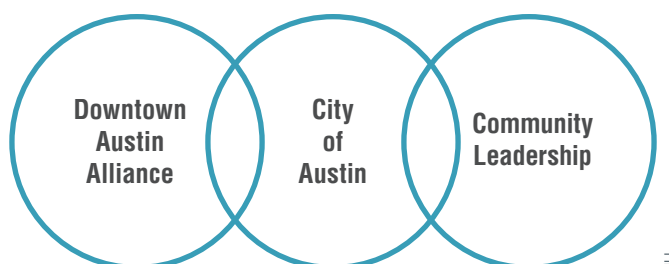
Based on the interviews the panel conducted and the many reports the panel read, the panel has identified the following as key outcomes for a community engagement process:

- *Co-create a vision for the future.* This vision should include an articulation of shared values, such as equity, as well as a commitment to incorporating these values across agencies, projects, and approaches.
- *Build trust among all stakeholders.* Historical injustices and exclusion, repeated attempts at updating I-35 with studies that did not result in change, and different growth priorities have led to distrust among stakeholder groups. It is critical that a community engagement process work to build trust as a precursor to building consensus (or agreement) on a path forward for the I-35 project. This can begin with naming and acknowledging past injustices that some stakeholder groups have experienced.
- *Create the Scoping Working Group.* This group will consist of representatives of the city of Austin, the Downtown Austin Alliance, and community leaders. Together, they will engage in the NEPA process.
- *Establish design principles.* These principles are intended to guide decision-making and the physical design for covering the highway.

Scoping Working Group

The Downtown Austin Alliance has made great strides in convening key partners through the creation of the I-35 Task Force and the East Austin Community Brain Trust. These groups should be considered the foundation for building the Scoping Working Group and expanding it to include stakeholder voices not currently represented. The leadership of the Scoping Working Group should be a joint effort by the Downtown Austin Alliance, the city of Austin, and selected community and neighborhood representatives.

The city of Austin has a critical part to play in this leadership structure because ultimately the city should have ownership of the caps and stitches. Although the Downtown Austin Alliance could potentially staff the Scoping Working Group, it would require additional funding for longer-term activities



This figure represents the Scoping Working Group leadership structure. Members of the group should build on the organizations that participated in the I-35 Task Force that developed questions for this panel report.

because some of the work is outside the bounds of its Public Improvement District boundaries. The panel believes that the Scoping Working Group would be a near-term activity over the next six to 12 months.

The panel recommends that the Scoping Working Group include representatives from local businesses, residential communities, nonprofits, institutional partners, merchants and small business owners, artists and civic and cultural groups, and individuals who have been displaced from historic communities of color along the development corridor. The group should be racially and economically diverse and consider how it will weigh the voices of those in power versus those who have been historically disenfranchised to balance institutional power and privilege within the group.

The panel recommends that the I-35 Task Force dissolve upon delivering and disseminating the panel's findings because that was its initial charge. However, some organizations that were a part of the I-35 Task Force could be included in the Scoping Working Group at the direction of this group's three-party leadership.

Participatory Design, Prototypes, and Delivery

People are already on the verge of engagement burnout, and a significant level of distrust arises from the history of redlining, the 1928 plan, and multiple past studies of I-35 that went nowhere. To achieve some of the goals (rebuild trust, help people imagine the future), it is important to come up with designs and deliver early tangible outcomes. Some ideas for early wins could be to do a no-car Sunday with a pop-up park on an off ramp; engage artists and put chalk on the underside of a ramp that invites people to draw their history. These activities can begin immediately and reflect the need to envision a future both with the threat from COVID-19 as well as when the threat lessens. To the extent possible, prototype ideas that have come from community meetings should state explicitly where the idea came from, and ask for feedback!

Design Principles and Tradeoffs

The panel recommends that one of the first community engagement exercises that should take place is to co-create design principles with stakeholders. The following framework for thinking about these design principles takes into account the tradeoff that they represent. These are themes that surfaced during interviews and research, but ultimately the Scoping Working Group should identify the main themes as well as

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DURING A PANDEMIC

The panelists discussed COVID-19 as a topical concern during the panel week but not with the foresight that the World Health Organization would declare it a pandemic several weeks later. Many of the panel's recommendations related to community engagement require extensive person-to-person conversations, which is not advised according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on preventing the spread of infectious diseases. The panel commends Mayor Adler for his leadership in making the difficult but right call to suspend the South by Southwest (SXSW) conference and festivals and the shelter-in-place order on March 24. This is something that must have been difficult and is resulting in financial hardship for the city and the region.

However, COVID-19 should not be used as an excuse to not engage with the community. Instead, community engagement should be delivered in a more creative way. Some ideas suggested by the panel that are being explored by their own

organizations include having virtual town halls using Facebook Live, YouTube Live, or other social media platforms to reach more people who may not have access to do a traditional webinar.

Especially because small businesses are getting hit very hard right now, one of these virtual town halls could be held "at" a certain business each week, where everyone who joins the virtual call buys a gift card to that restaurant as if they were buying a coffee or another item. They could rotate each time, so every week, other businesses receive support of the community. It could be an hour-long discussion on a certain topic related to economic development, the highway plan, or other topic and have a clear host who is asking/fielding questions.

Additional ideas include the following:

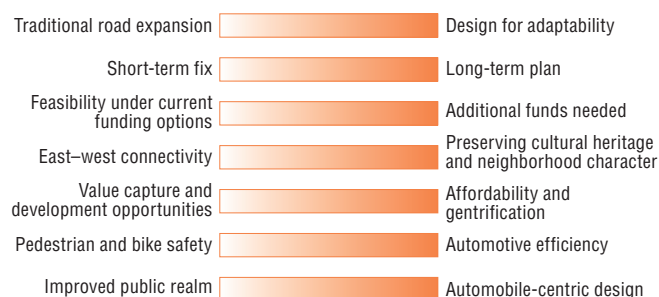
- Setting up a group chat or page where the Scoping Work Group can share updates and allow participants to have conversations with each other. This could be accomplished through open Slack channels or WhatsApp groups, for example.
- Neighborland (<https://neighborhoodland.com>) is a really good platform for community engagement on large-scale projects, and Imby (<https://imby.community/>), launched in Washington, D.C., is another platform to engage those that support development projects and to provide constructive feedback. This is also an opportunity to use SpeakUP Austin for this project.
- A final option could be to invite people to post things on social media with a shared hashtag in response to a particular question or idea. An example of this is the #RTEVirtualParade on Twitter that had a Virtual St. Paddy's Day Parade.



The panel stopped at the Mr. Natural health-food grocery/vegetarian restaurant on the Monday tour. Small, local businesses need support during this time of social distancing.

prioritize where on these gradients/tradeoffs the group wants to sit.

Thinking through these principles and tradeoffs early will enhance creation of a unified, co-created vision. The panel believes this project works best if the ambitions for what it involves and what it accomplishes are bigger: that is, about inclusivity not only of people but also of place. Then, these principles can be ready for the next steps in the process of defining, clarifying, and advancing the vision during design, construction, and opening.



Sample tradeoffs identified by the panel for development of the design principles.



PAUL ANGELONE/ULI

Designing for Connectivity and Mobility

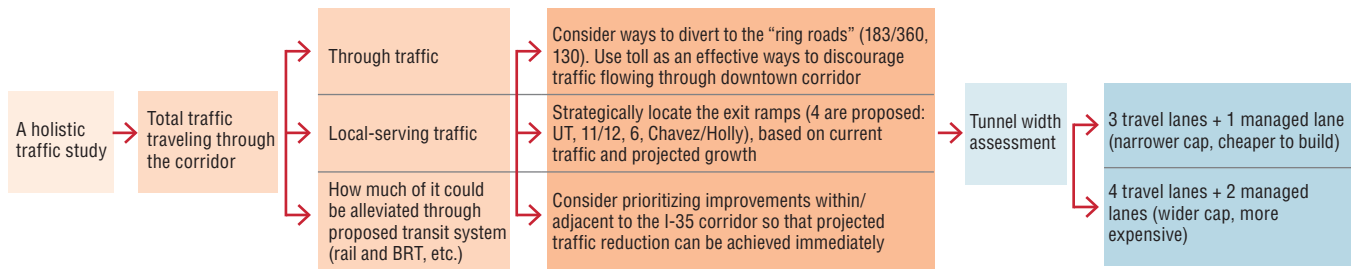
THINKING OF I-35 AS A LARGE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PROJECT—not just as an isolated highway project for downtown—is critical. This is a once-in-a-generation project that can be transformative to enhancing urban design and increasing connectivity and mobility for the Austin region.

I-35 is a multilane long-distance highway that slices north–south through the center city of Austin with little deference to the districts, universities, and communities it was designed to serve, while severing neighborhoods. Its many, many on and off ramps near the University of Texas at Austin and the Capitol district slow the speed of travel on I-35 to a virtual crawl at rush hours that start early and end late. Seventy percent of the vehicles traveling this route are bound to or from the downtown area, which also increases travel times for long-distance trucks and other travelers driving to regional, cross-state, and international destinations. Although drivers could choose to use higher-capacity tolled highways that skirt Austin to the east of the city, the panel heard that they prefer the straight, free route of I-35 because it takes a similar amount of time.

The I-35 ROW averages about 245 feet wide, and its travel lanes are frequently on structured berms and elevated viaducts, which together with the on and off ramps make crossing arduous and hazardous for pedestrians, bikers, scooters, and local traffic. The broad and varied ROW that I-35 travels through downtown Austin occupies an area of more than 116 acres, which is about the size of an urban 18-hole golf course. The nearby nine-hole Hancock Golf Course is 93 acres, and the 18-hole Lions Municipal Course is 141 acres.

The undergrounding of the highway creates a great opportunity to reconnect the districts and urban corridors that set the framework for East Austin and downtown. The project can become a catalyst for growth and prosperity for many Austin

An Integrated Approach to the I-35 Project



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neighborhoods. It can also become the impetus for rethinking patterns of movement by vehicles and people in downtown.

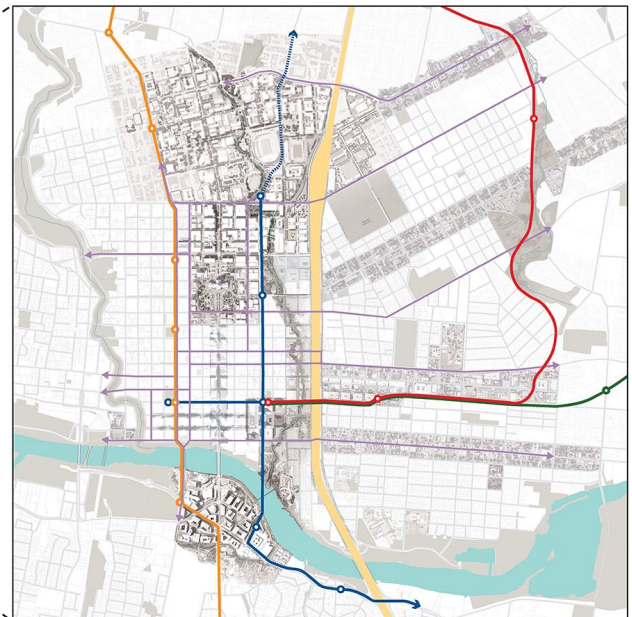
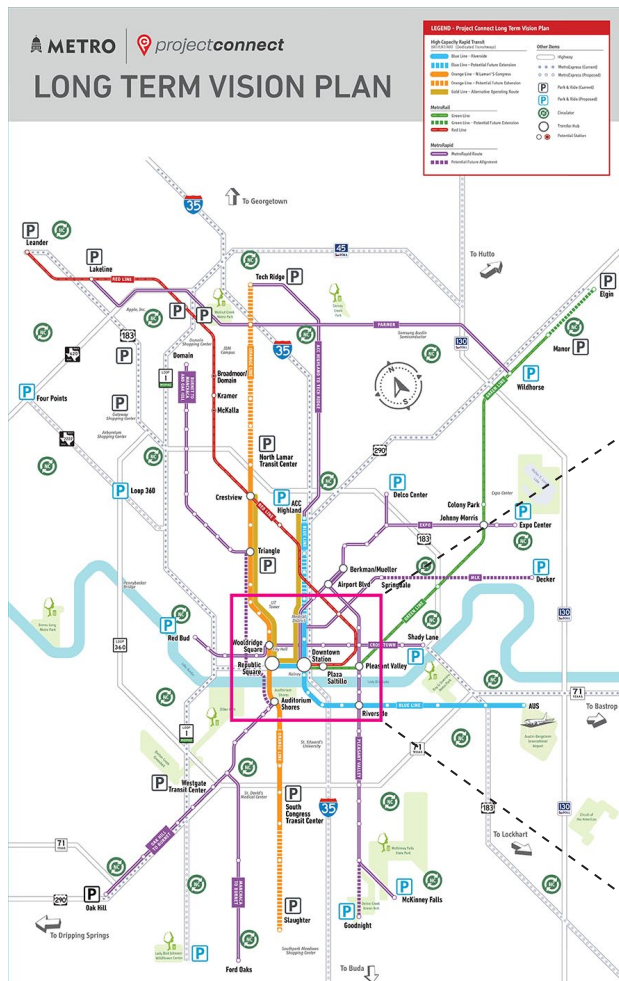
Creating an Integrated Approach to the I-35 Project

The future requirements for road capacity and use cannot be determined by looking only at this project. The design and use of the new I-35 must be closely interrelated with additionally proposed mobility projects and programs to achieve new ways

to accommodate all modes of travel, and to give drivers and riders access to a transportation network that can contribute toward the goals of improved air quality, decarbonization, greater transportation equity, and new choices about where to live and work as Austin continues to grow.

Considering the project more holistically and using a more integrated approach will enable critical decisions to shape the design. These include the following:

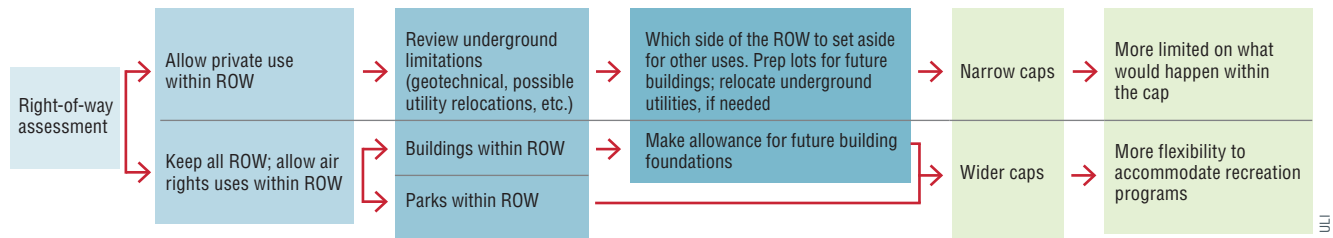
- Regional transportation decisions about encouraging more through traffic to use the I-35 alternative State Highway (SH) 130 or the other ring roads, SH 183 or SH 360.
- Determining whether all the proposed exit ramps are necessary. For example, the panel debated the necessity of the East Sixth Street interchange because those businesses adjoining this entertainment district would likely be better served by pedestrian and other nonvehicular traffic, which often spends more money over the course of a year than drivers do.



CAPITAL METRO: DOWNTOWN AUSTIN ALLIANCE: KELSEY JAMES-KAVANAUGH/ULI

The I-35 corridor and study area in context with the Capital Metro Project Connect long-term vision.

Considerations in Designing the I-35 Project



- How the I-35 project fits into the implementation of the Capital Metro–led Project Connect that creates additional north–south and east–west connections. Some of the local traffic could be diverted as part of this project and

would allow a combined I-35/Project Connect of between \$12 billion and \$17 billion in new regional transportation spending.

- How the community-driven engagement process and principles should be incorporated into the project scope.

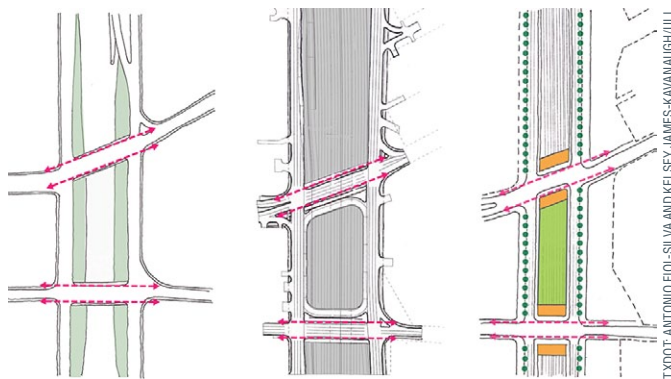
Some of these decisions have already been made, and others are more flexible. However, it is important to understand which decisions can be modified since they affect the overall cost. A smaller I-35 with three travel lanes plus one managed lane in each direction would be cheaper to build than the more expensive four travel lanes and two managed lanes currently proposed by TxDOT. Regardless, this change will affect the design of the project.

Designing the I-35 Project

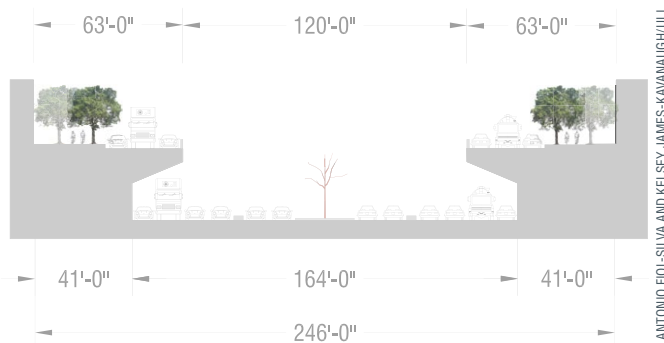
The I-35 project can create a distinctive new experience and an expanded public realm for the local community by reconnecting east and west Austin. The new spaces along this corridor should provide local communities and visitors with a beautiful, vibrant, urban environment. The project should introduce a mix of uses that complement the surrounding area, create opportunities for a range of new land uses along the I-35 frontages, and stimulate new public and private-sector investments throughout the entire study area.

Effective urban design strategies for the I-35 ROW should demonstrate an integrated approach by including a full range of travel modes, incorporating sustainable design principles and adopting innovative construction techniques. Successful design concepts for the public realm will be ones that celebrate Austin's rich history, culture, and diversity as well as be designed to accommodate change over time and be built to support programming for long-term viability.

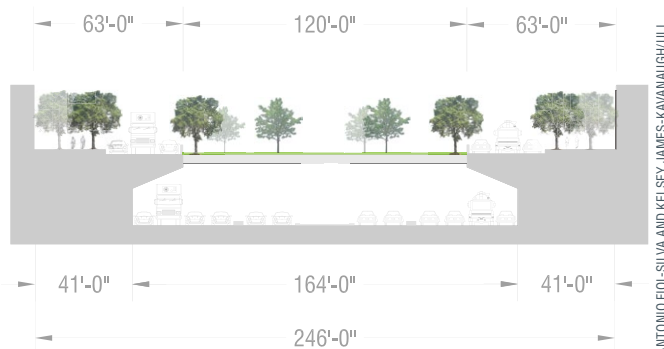
The panel's initial design task was to analyze the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the new ROW proposed by TxDOT. Under existing conditions, the ROW is 245 feet wide with a center of 215 feet. The TxDOT proposal is for a depressed highway with a ROW that is enlarged to 360 feet wide and a center of 210 feet.



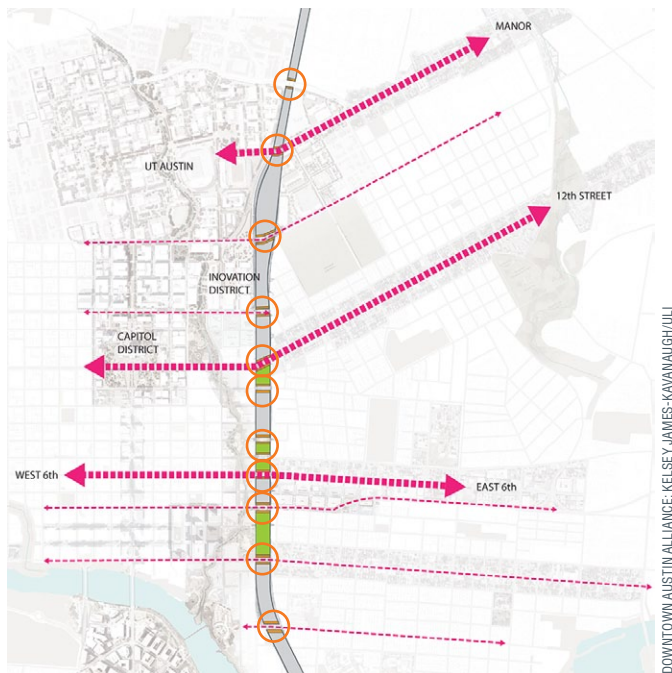
The existing I-35 (left), the TxDOT-proposed I-35 (center), and the panel-proposed I-35 at East 12th Street and East 11th Street.



The proposed cross section. Art created by local artists to "keep Austin weird" could be incorporated into the median.



Proposed cross section with a cap.



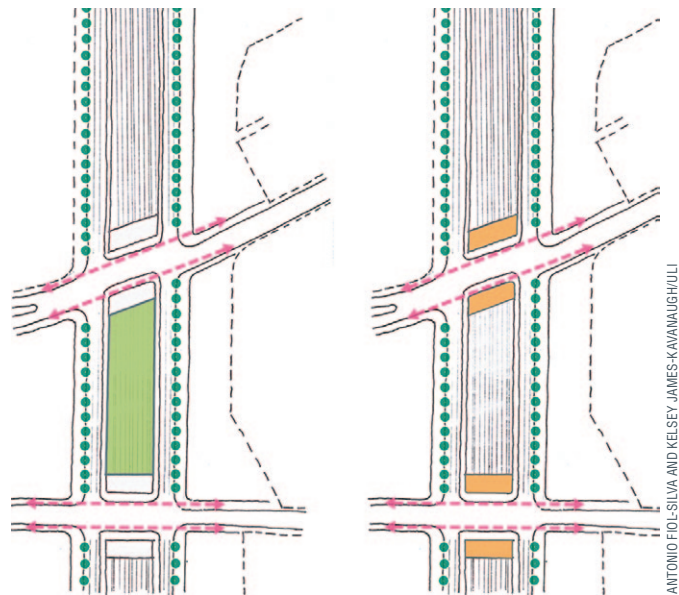
Proposed cap and stitch locations along the I-35 corridor. The orange circles represent stitches and green areas represent caps. The dashed lines are minor and major nonvehicular and public transit crossing points.

The panel suggests this dimension should be reconsidered through capacity studies that take into account the changes to use of private vehicles as well as the choices being offered by Project Connect and other at-grade transportation alternatives. The panel proposes that the same number of travel lanes and managed lanes as envisioned by TxDOT could be constructed with a ROW of 246 feet with a center of 120 feet while also allowing a surface-level boulevard split into one-way pairs with broad sidewalks on the west and east sides. The panel suggests that the same amount of travel and number of managed lanes envisioned by TxDOT could be constructed with very little widening of the ROW. By keeping the ROW proposed by TxDOT and using the panel's proposal, about 114 feet would be available for other uses such as housing.

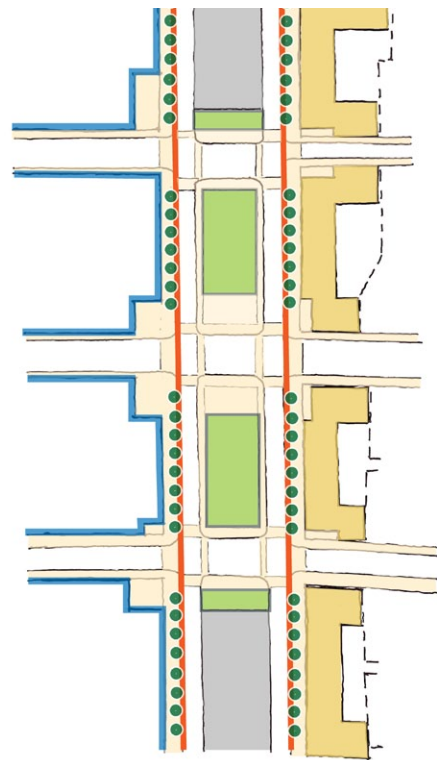
In some areas, such as near the University of Texas at Austin, the panel recognizes that this design might not be possible. The boulevard should run the entire I-35 project area—from Holly Street to at least Airport Boulevard.

Cap and Stitch Proposed Locations

For some advocates, a complete covering of the highway is the goal. The panel considered this option but also explored locations in which the caps and stitches would be most beneficial. TxDOT should construct the support structures as



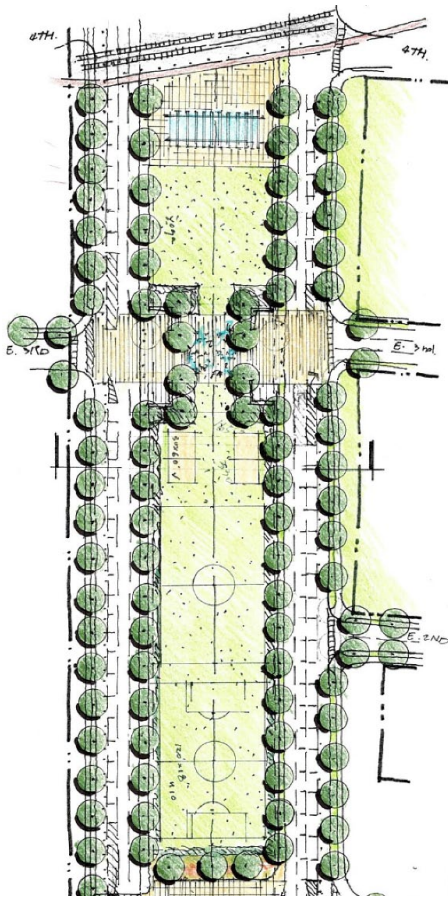
The proposed East 12th Street to 11th Street cap (left) and stitch (right).



The proposed East Eighth Street to East Sixth Street cap and stitch. The right-of-way shows how mixed-income housing could be built on state-owned land.

I-35 is rebuilt, and the caps and stitches should be built at one time. From north to south these are as follows:

- East 12th Street to East 11th Street;
- East Eighth Street to East Sixth Street; and
- East Fourth Street to East Cesar Chavez Street.



The proposed East Fourth Street to East Cesar Chavez Street cap and stitch.

The panel did not recommend any particular caps north of East 12th Street, but significant safety improvements for pedestrians, bicyclists, scooters, and the like should be implemented at each of the I-35 crossings within the study area. Stitches should be implemented, from north to south, at East Dean Keeton Street, Manor Road, East Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, East Fifth Street, and River Street. Pedestrian bridges should also be considered at the University of Texas at Austin campus and north of East 51st Street where pedestrians cross the freeway without any official crossings.

East 12th Street to East 11th Street

The panel recommends placing a cap and stitches between East 12th Street and East 11th Street. This section of I-35 is near the University of Texas at Austin's planned Moody Center (basketball arena), and a cap and stitches will help facilitate east–west access to the University of Texas at Austin campus. This area can also serve as an entrance to the emerging Innovation District and the Dell Medical School, and can connect East Austin to Waterloo Park and Austin's trail system.

A cap in this location also connects to the commercial corridors within East Austin.

East Eighth Street to East Sixth Street

The panel recommends placing a cap between East Sixth Street and East Seventh Street and another cap between East Seventh Street and East Eighth Street. The panel also recommends placing stitches along the outer edges of Sixth and Eighth streets over the ROW to further extend this space. The area between East Eighth Street and East Sixth Street is a major center for Project Connect. In addition, strong commercial districts exist on both sides of I-35 along this stretch. This area is a key link between east and west Austin, making it well positioned for a series of caps and stitches.

The panel believes that the ROW can be better used to support the construction of mixed-income housing while still allowing for the proposed TxDOT travel and managed lanes. The housing would be constructed off the freeway cap, allowing cheaper construction and making it easier to finance since the structures would not have to depend on the life cycle of the cap.

East Fourth Street to East Cesar Chavez Street

The panel recommends placing a cap between East Fourth Street and East Cesar Chavez Street. This stretch of I-35 is directly adjacent to the historic Palm School—a landmark central to Austin's Mexican American community and a reminder of downtown's historical landscape. The cap would connect to the Cesar Chavez commercial corridor and draw visitors to the Sir Swante Palm Neighborhood park as well as Austin's trail system.

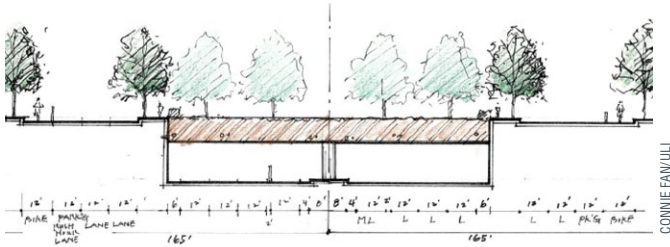
The panel proposes that the recreational facilities be culturally appropriate and supportive to the nearby predominantly Mexican American community.

Urban Design Considerations

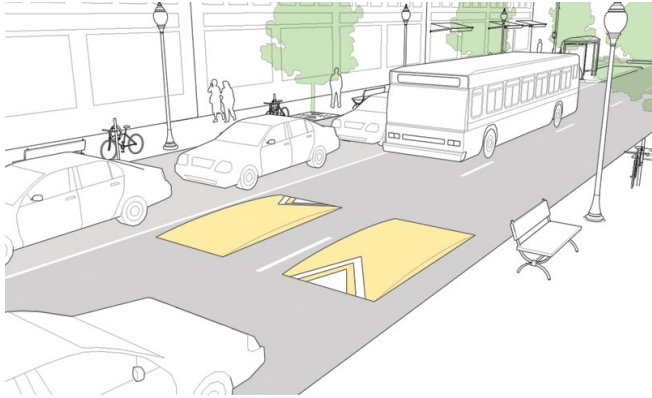
Some additional design considerations include the following.

The Boulevard: East Avenue/Frontage Road

The streets are an important component of the public realm, serving both a transportation function and contributing to the overall urban character. The components that make up the existing Frontage Road should be designed and organized in a way that accommodates vehicular circulation while also providing an ample, welcoming, and inviting pedestrian environment. This includes significantly reduced speed



A proposed boulevard system that includes pedestrian, bike, and vehicular lanes as well three travel lanes and one managed lane in each direction. The highway proposal is an alternative to the TxDOT proposal.



Speed cushions encourage decreased vehicular speeds while allowing large vehicles like fire engines or buses to bypass.

limits and traffic calming elements such as speed cushions. Roadways should be sized to accommodate travel lanes and provide on-street parking lanes where possible.

Circulation and Pedestrian Routes

North–south connections should be provided. East–west connections should link downtown and East Austin neighborhoods. New internal streets should be designed as secondary streets, thereby allowing services (parking garage entrances and loading) to be removed from the perimeter of the site. These secondary streets should be designed as narrower streets reflecting a more pedestrian nature. Parking and loading access should not be located along Frontage Road. Frontage streets should be activated with building entrances and storefronts. Then, Fourth Street and 15th Street should be developed to support future planned transit on this corridor and activated with retail uses to enhance the pedestrian experience along the corridor.

Transportation Innovation and Technology

The transportation landscape is changing both at a macro level (automated vehicles for passengers and freight) and at the micro level (scooters and e-bikes). As the future of transportation



New technologies such as autonomous vehicles provide the opportunity to create more people-focused design. More about this concept can be found here: urbanland.uli.org/planning-design/people-driven-design-planning-urban-future-autonomous-vehicles/.

changes, steps should be taken during the design process to rethink how public space is dedicated to parking and driving, allowing pedestrians, bicycles, scooters, and autonomous vehicle traffic to safely intermingle. The caps and stitches—especially at East Sixth Street and East 12th Street because of their centrality in the Project Connect longer-term vision—could serve as mobility hubs that enable people and freight to seamlessly transfer between modes. Some of this could be built within the public ROW, but opportunities also exist to work with private partners to incorporate futuristic ideas into the I-35 project.

Other Elements of Good Urban Design

On-street parking should be provided to the extent possible to accommodate short-term visitors and retail customers, creating a buffer between pedestrian and vehicular traffic that will enhance the pedestrian experience. Spaces such as sidewalks, plazas, and parks, as well as buildings, should be designed to be usable by everyone. The needs of all potential users, regardless of ability, should be considered at an early stage of design to better ensure that barriers to access are eliminated and equitable use of all facilities and spaces is promoted. Many resources are available for examples of how to create good urban design that is sustainable and inclusive, including from the Urban Land Institute, Smart Growth America, the Project for Public Spaces, PolicyLink, and the World Resources Institute.